

Stephen J. Milner, ed. *At the Margins. Minority Groups in Premodern Italy*. (Medieval Cultures; v. 39.) University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Pp. 283.

This interesting collection of essays demonstrates how the study of diversity and the other continues to mature and take on even more complex issues. Examining the margins has developed from discussions of simple dichotomies and assigning labels of victimhood to a fully nuanced examination of power negotiations among various groups. By applying a broad sociological definition of marginality, the scholars in this volume have increased the groups they deem borderline to include a variety of interesting social microcosms. The four sections address different aspects of the relationships between margins and centers.

Editor Stephen J. Milner's preface notes the centrality of the Italian Renaissance to "the hegemonic discourse of Western civilization" and suggests "that focusing renewed attention on its margins might not only question the universality of such a grand narrative, but also serve to open up new vistas and perspectives upon a past constantly subject to

reinvention" (ix). While this is undoubtedly true, the focus on Italy and Florence here reinscribes their centrality to the Renaissance master narrative. The essays in the first section, "The Centrality of Margins," establish the conceptual groundwork for understanding the ever-shifting relationship of borders and centers that the subsequent essays examine in specific contexts.

"Identity and the Margins of Italian Renaissance Culture," also by Milner, introduces the critical language and theoretical approach of the book. The margin is defined as a "buffer zone in which the integrity and permanency of identities are questioned and contested" while the center "is a place where normative values and structures are more firmly rooted and clearly expressed and the contingency of identities less apparent" (4). Building on the work of Victor Turner and Michel Foucault, the essays in this book are about negotiated identities and the processes of description operative in late medieval and early modern Italy. In "Decentering the Italian Renaissance: The Challenge of Postmodernism," Peter Burke defines postmodernism by its two central characteristics: the critique of Grand Narrative and the linguistic turn. The linguistic

turn here has three features: greater concern with the language of historical documents, the conceptualization of culture as a text, and an emphasis on the power of language in everyday life.

Part II, "Negotiating Margins," contains four essays about groups (sodomites, Jews, nuns, foundlings) within Italian society, which are typically considered to be on the margins. The essays show in a very convincing manner that the members of these groups are alternately disempowered and empowered as cultural shifts, financial realities, and political expediency work on individual circumstances. In "The Ambivalence of Policing Sexual Margins: Sodomy and Sodomites in Florence," Michael Rocke illustrates blatant inconsistencies in the control of sodomy in Florence as the governing class adopted a strategy aimed at containing it within acceptable bounds rather than repressing it outright. "Stigma, Acceptance, and the End of Liminality: Jews and Christians in Early Modern Italy" by Kenneth R. Stow examines the negotiations of power between the Jewish population, converted Jews, and the papacy which resulted in the creation of the Jewish ghettos. Mary Laven's "Cast Out and Shut In: The Experience of Nuns in Counter-Reformation Venice"

takes a group that might not seem to be at the margins and shows the paradoxes that rendered female religious simultaneously marginal and central. Despite strict efforts to confine them, nuns nevertheless found ways to resist enclosure and sustain a surprisingly wide group of relationships. In "From *Putte* to *Puttane*: Female Foundlings and Charitable Institutions in Northern Italy, 1530-1630," Philip Gavitt surveys the ways a wide variety of institutions attempted to save the moral lives of young girls, placing the problematic of gender squarely within the context of the collective salvation of the city and the honor of the dukes of Tuscany.

Part III, "Marginal Voices," continues the same program, but looks more specifically at literacy and its connection with de-centered groups. Foucault's idea of "reverse discourse" is illustrated here in the ways those from the margins find a voice. Judith Bryce's "*Les Livre des Florentines*: Reconsidering Women's Literacy in Quattrocento Florence" offers a re-evaluation of women's experiences as consumers of the written word. While apparently marginal and marginalized, women nevertheless found textual confirmation of their importance as the spiritual equals of men. "Exile, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Civic Republican

Discourse” by Stephen Milner looks at one of the foremost experiences of marginalization in Italy—everyone, it seems, was at one time being exiled or imposing exile. Milner identifies the exiles’ use of Ciceronian discourse in their writings as the source of a communal identity for this diverse group. In “Dominican Marginalia: The Late Fifteenth Century Printing Press of San Jacopo di Ripoli in Florence” by Anabel Thomas, the surviving ledger of a printing house (*Magliachechiano* X 143) and one of its particular productions (*Libro della Compagnia del Rosario*) witness the ways female religious establishments gained access to the central city.

The concluding Part IV, “Minority Groups,” looks at those groups traditionally labeled as “other”: slaves, mountain men, and the destitute elderly. “Slaves in Italy, 1350-1550” by Steven Epstein demonstrates the ethnic complexity of Italian slavery and the attendant difficulty of generalizing about the group. In “The Marginality of Mountaineers in Renaissance Florence,” Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. points out that the geographical area of Florence included the population of the mountain areas who had always been considered “liminal groups.” Dennis Romano’s “Vecchi, Poveri, e Impotenti: The Elderly

in Renaissance Venice” uses this sidelined group to argue that being old was better for some than for others. All of these minorities constitute fluid categories again demonstrating that, as the editor proposes in his introduction, “[i]n the normal run of things no one person or group will be equally and consistently empowered and no one will suffer uniform disempowerment although the chances are clearly not the same for everyone.”

At the Margins is a rich volume of intriguing essays. What distinguishes this collection is the especially fine use of sources and close well focused arguments into a new area enlightened by critical theory.

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Liz Herbert McAvoy.
*Authority and the Female
Body in the Writings of
Julian of Norwich and
Margery Kempe.* Boydell
Press, 2004. Pp. viii + 276

In recent years there have been almost too many studies of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe to count: at